

ACTION: Preparation of an environmental assessment.

SUMMARY: MMS is preparing an environmental assessment (EA) to examine the potential effects on the marine and coastal environments of using sand from Ship Shoal, a sand shoal located approximately 10 miles south of Isle Dernieres, offshore the central coast of Louisiana. Geological and geophysical studies of Ship Shoal have determined that the shoal's sand is an ideal source of material to place on the rapidly eroding Louisiana barrier islands. Several coastal restoration and storm protection projects that propose to use sand from Ship Shoal are already in the planning stages. The Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LDNR), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) are assisting during development of the EA. We will publish an announcement in the **Federal Register** when the EA has been completed and is available to the public.

Public Comment: MMS requests interested parties to submit comments specific to the environmental issues related to the removal of sand resources from Ship Shoal. Comments should be sent to Chief, Leasing Division, Minerals Management Service, 381 Elden Street, Mail Stop 4030, Herndon, Virginia 20170. In addition, comments may be sent by e-mail to barry.drucker@mms.gov. Your comments should be submitted on or before July 1, 2003.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Minerals Management Service, Leasing Division, Sand and Gravel Unit, 381 Elden Street, Mail Stop 4030, Herndon, Virginia 20170, Mr. Barry Drucker, telephone (703) 787-1296, e-mail: barry.drucker@mms.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Louisiana's coastal land loss problem continues at a rate of more than 30 square miles per year severely affecting the storm buffering capacity and the protection that nearshore barrier islands provide to human populations, oil and gas infrastructure, inland bays, estuaries, and wetlands. The bays inshore of the islands are huge estuaries where freshwater and saltwater mix and most of Louisiana's commercial and recreational fish depend on them during parts of their life cycle. Without barrier islands, coastal fisheries will experience significant adverse impacts. The entire Isle Dernieres chain in offshore central Louisiana, a critical component of the Louisiana barrier island system, is projected to be lost by the year 2010. A

study by the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act task force recommended returning Isles Dernieres and the Timbalier Islands to 1992 conditions (pre-Hurricane Andrew), which would require adding sand to build them to a width of about 1,230 feet wide and 8-9 feet above sea level. The current overall strategy is to restore the island chains to a condition suitable for providing coastal protection and for maintaining the integrity of the estuarine system.

Geological and geophysical studies of Ship Shoal indicate that very significant similarities exist among the properties of Ship Shoal and the nearby barrier islands. Ship Shoal sand is considered ideal material for use in restoration and nourishment projects along the Louisiana coast within the Terrebonne and Barataria Basins. Resource estimates for the volumes of sand comprising the Ship Shoal structure are 1.2 billion cubic meters.

MMS has already been notified by LDNR and EPA that they will seek leases for the use of Ship Shoal sand for planned projects at Whiskey Island and New Cut, Louisiana. In addition, USACE is considering using Ship Shoal sand as a base for the levee system for the Morganza to the Gulf Hurricane Protection Project. Besides these efforts, MMS anticipates that Ship Shoal will serve as a long-term source of material for further Louisiana coastal restoration efforts well into the future.

Public Law 103-426, enacted October 31, 1994, gave MMS the authority to convey, on a noncompetitive basis, the rights to Federal sand, gravel, or shell resources for shore protection, beach or wetlands restoration projects, or for use in construction projects funded in whole or in part by or authorized by the Federal Government.

Dated: May 12, 2003.

Thomas A. Readinger,
Associate Director for Offshore Minerals Management.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Minerals Management Service

Outer Continental Shelf, Central Planning Area, Oil and Gas Lease Sale 190 (2004)

AGENCY: Minerals Management Service, Interior.

ACTION: Preparation of an Environmental Assessment.

SUMMARY: The Minerals Management Service (MMS) is beginning preparation of an environmental assessment (EA) for proposed Lease Sale 190 (scheduled for March 2004) in the Central Planning Area (CPA) of the Gulf of Mexico (GOM). The preparation of this EA is the first step in the decision process for Lease Sale 190. The proposal and alternatives for Lease Sale 190 were identified by the Director of MMS in January 2002 following the Call for Information and Nominations/Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and were analyzed in the *Final Environmental Impact Statement for Proposed Central Gulf of Mexico OCS Oil and Gas Lease Sales 185, 190, 194, 198, and 201, and Proposed Western Gulf of Mexico OCS Oil and Gas Lease Sales 187, 192, 196, and 200* (Final EIS). A CPA proposed action analyzed in the Final EIS was the offering of all available unleased acreage in the CPA. Three alternatives were analyzed: exclude blocks within 15 miles of Baldwin County, Alabama, coast; exclude blocks near biologically sensitive topographic features; and cancel the lease sale. The analysis in the EA will reexamine the potential environmental effects of the proposed action and its alternatives based on any new information regarding potential impacts and issues that were not available at the time the Final EIS was prepared.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, 1201 Elmwood Park Boulevard, New Orleans, Louisiana 70123-2394, Mr. Joseph Christopher, telephone (504) 736-2774.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: In November 2002, MMS prepared a Final EIS, which addressed nine proposed Federal actions that offer for lease areas on the GOM OCS that may contain economically recoverable oil and gas resources. Federal regulations allow for several related or similar proposals to be analyzed in one EIS (40 CFR 1502.4). Since each proposed lease sale and its projected activities are very similar each year for each planning area, a single EIS was prepared for the nine CPA and Western Planning Area (WPA) lease sales scheduled in the *Outer Continental Shelf Oil and Gas Leasing Program: 2002-2007* (the 5-Year Program). Under the 5-Year Program, five annual areawide lease sales are scheduled for the CPA (Lease Sales 185, 190, 194, 198, and 201) and five annual areawide lease sales are scheduled for the WPA (Lease Sales 184, 187, 192, 196, and 200). Lease Sale 184 was not addressed in the Final EIS; a separate